

Highlights from the Equal Voice Conference

*Equal Voice is a multi-partisan, non-profit organization with the mission to promote more women to all levels of Government. To celebrate Equal Voice's tenth anniversary and the global centenary of International Women's Day, a summit entitled **Leveraging Women's Leadership for the 21st Century: Changing the Game in Ottawa** was held in Ottawa on **March 10 & 11, 2011**.*

The conference was attended by a rich variety of women (and a few young men) from all parts of the country, with the single unifying interest in addressing Canada's persistent democratic deficit. Attendees were informed by an impressive lineup of women leaders from all levels of government, the media and academia.

The conference opened with the launch of a new Equal Voice program, *Deep Roots, Strong Wings*, an on-line campaign school customized for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women. Developed in consultation with Aboriginal women across the country, the program is intended to be a useful tool and catalyst for Aboriginal women's increased political engagement.

Keynote speakers shared their experiences in politics, addressed the gender dynamics that pervade North American politics, and examined the impact of women's contribution in the public and private sectors in Norway where women's political representation has been consistently over 40% during the last decade.

Keynote Speakers: **Trine Skei Grande**, Leader, Liberal Party of Norway; **Jennifer Lawless, PhD**, Director, Women & Politics Institute, Associate Professor, American University (Washington DC); and **Hon. Rona Ambrose, PC, MP** Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Minister of State for Status of Women.

Panels explored the following topics:

- the key elements that are essential for a successful nominations bid,
- the experiences of being on the campaign trail,
- the role and impact of the media's portrayal and coverage of female politicians,
- the political culture surrounding the challenges faced by female elected officials,
- the delicate balance between work and family life,
- transformation of the political landscape, and
- a youth forum for women 30 years of age and under.

Moderators: **Hon. Sheila Copps**, Former Deputy Prime Minister; **Jane Taber**, Globe and Mail and CTV Question Period, **Shari Graydon**, Informed Opinions; **Jen Hunter**, The Learning Catalyst and Green Party of Canada Candidate; and **Adrian Harewood**, CBC News Ottawa.

Panelists:

- **Françoise Boivin**, NDP Candidate – Gatineau

- **Bernadette Clement**, Councillor, City of Cornwall / Federal Liberal Candidate – Stormont Dundas and South Glengarry
- **Penny Priddy**, Former Councillor, Member of Parliament, Minister
- **Hon. Lisa Raitt, PC, MP** Minister of Labour
- **Susan Delacourt**, Senior Writer, Toronto Star
- **Steve Paikin**, Anchor, TVO - The Agenda
- **Laura Peck**, Vice President, McLoughlin Media
- **Joanne St. Lewis**, Associate Professor, University of Ottawa
- **Hon. Jean Augustine, PC CM** Ontario Fairness Commissioner
- **Patty DuCharme**, Vice President, Public Service Alliance of Canada
- **Hon. Janet Ecker**, President, Toronto Financial Services Alliance, Former Minister, Government of Ontario
- **Marie Wilson**, Commissioner, Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- **Hon. Pat Carney, PC**, Retired Senator for British Columbia
- **Martha Hall Findlay**, Member of Parliament, Willowdale
- **Nancy Karetak-Lindell**, Former Member of Parliament, Nunavut
- **Lisa MacLeod**, Member of Provincial Parliament, Nepean-Carleton
- **Hon. Michael Chong, PC** Member of Parliament, Wellington-Halton Hills
- **Françoise David, CQ**, Spokesperson, Quebec Solidaire
- **Deborah Gillis**, Senior Vice President, Membership and Global Operations, Catalyst
- **Chief Diane Kelly**, Grand Chief, Grand Council Treaty #3
- **H.E. Mohau Pheko**, High Commissioner of South Africa to Canada

The underlying theme of the conference was moving from “why” women should have an equal voice, to “how” we can get there. A critical mass, as stated by the United Nations, is seen to be paramount in changing the present “Old Boy’s Club” into a body of politics that better reflects Canada’s population (52% women). Political parties also play a role in helping to ensure that women are elected. Not only must they encourage women to participate in politics, they must encourage them to run in ridings where they will be elected. It was even suggested that parties need to have mandatory parity within their parties.

Without some structural change, either constitutional or individual party policy, the progress will continue to be slow. When Equal Voice began 10 years ago, 20% of federal members of parliament were women - now there are 22%. (More shocking, women only rise to speak in the House of Commons 7% of the time.) Equal Voice has set a new goal of 33% women in every legislature and municipality across the country in the next 10 years. If the energy at the conference is any indication of what can be achieved, the next decade will yield some favourable results for women.

Rhea Pretsell
CFUW Ontario Council
Chair, Standing Committee on the Status of Women & Human Rights